



Undergraduate Review

Volume 14

Article 20

2018

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Recommended Citation

Serna, Sophie (2018). Western Appearance Culture, Media, and the Body as a Project. *Undergraduate Review*, 14, 129-139.
Available at: https://vc.bridgew.edu/undergrad_rev/vol14/iss1/20

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Western Appearance Culture, Media, and the Body as a Project

SOPHIE SERNA

Abstract

In our contemporary appearance culture, media has been complicit in convincing women that the body is a measure of overall happiness and one's value to society. Because of this it should be viewed as a project that needs constant attention and upkeep. This research explores the way the media, and more specifically, health and fitness magazines, address the body as a project with endless room for improvement. Believing that the human body can be molded and significantly transformed can lead to unrealistic expectations, causing many women to feel negatively about themselves. Through a textual analysis of the U.S. magazine *Health*, this research examines messages about the way women should think about their bodies. Analysis found that this magazine encourages readers to identify problems in themselves and to seek to fix these on an individual level. These problems are heavily related to the body, appearance, and health. Resolving these problems is viewed as a project involving personal commitment on the path to health and happiness.

Introduction

Western appearance culture is a powerful structure that encourages individuals to think of health and appearance as primarily a personal choice and to work toward constant improvement. In our contemporary appearance culture, media has been complicit in convincing women that the body is a measure of overall happiness and one's value to society and that it should be viewed as a project that needs constant attention and upkeep. As Tiggeman, Polivy, and Hargreaves (2009) note, popular media suggests that these contemporary beauty ideals come with a wide

array of psychological benefits and positive life outcomes.

This paper examines these attributes of western appearance culture as an example of what Gill (2007) terms "post-feminism." Post-feminism describes a media response to feminist critiques of objectifying and pacifying practices. Analysis of this response helps us understand how women look at the body as a project and how we as a culture have come to treat attractiveness and sexuality as primary values. Positing the power of female sexuality, post-feminism provides a means for women to see their bodies as leverage in the world (Salmenniemi, 2014). This post-feminist perspective has consequences for identity formation and contributes to the constant and extensive self-monitoring and regulation of the body that defines Western appearance culture. This self-regulation encourages women to monitor their own bodies for any transgressions against the ideals of appearance culture. These specific mechanisms are successful in regulating power because "the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular" (Duncan, 1994, p. 50). Finally, in this culture of self-monitoring, "confessions" reinforce this panoptic process whereby individuals participate in identifying their shortcomings through fat talk, which is the ritualistic conversation about one's own and other's bodies (Arryo & Harwood, 2012), while at the same time repeatedly reinforcing things that need to be improved upon in order to empower oneself. Through all these cultural practices, the body comes to be viewed as an ongoing project that requires a great deal of work and upkeep to achieve happiness and self-fulfillment.

Post-feminism and the Body

As Gill (2007) identifies it, post-feminism is a term that describes a response to feminist critiques of media that represent women as passive, sexual objects. Gill (2007) notes, however, that while post-feminism cloaks itself within feminist concerns representing women as powerful sexual subjects, it nevertheless should be recognized as a new form of female self-objectification.

In this it allows a contemporary version of femininity that offers a self-objectifying relation to the body as empowerment.

Objectification theory states that sexual objectification occurs when a woman is reduced to or treated as a body, or a collection of body parts, available for sexual use (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 228). This mentality is not only demeaning to females, but it can also contribute to a host of mental health issues for girls and women, including anxiety, eating disorders, depression, and reduced sexual functioning (McLean & LaGuardia, 2016). Traditionally, advertising and media more generally, have participated in this sexual objectification of women. For feminist scholars, the concept of the “male gaze” draws attention to the structured ways in which this sexual objectification is accomplished through media, visually constructing women as passive objects of male sexual desire (Patterson & Elliot, 2002).

Responding to criticisms of these objectifying tendencies of media, some representations have pushed for a more active construction of female sexuality, changing the way women are portrayed in the ads and placing them in positions of control. This response offered an image that moved away from passive sexual objectification to a more active version of female sexuality. However, as Gill (2007) notes, this did not simply create a clear break with objectification. Instead, it offered an image of women where they actively participate in self-objectifying practices. Gill (2007) defines this new active objectification as a media response to feminist criticisms that she has coined post-feminism.

The intertwining of practices of objectification and a sense of female power is an important characteristic of post-feminism. According to Gill (2007), post-feminism can be thought of as a media and social response to feminism, including the intertwining of anti-feminist and feminist ideas relating to themes of individuality, pleasing oneself, and the power of choice. Western media has become home to post-feminism in part because it is completely saturated with an appearance culture that calls for women to be thin and attractive while also insisting that this is

something every female should want to do as an ethical obligation to herself and viewing this as a matter of personal choice and freedom.

In this climate, where sexual objectification has come to be understood as an example of women’s freedom, the practice of self-scrutiny comes to be viewed as an important part of happiness and liberation rather than a negative effect of beauty ideals. Women are often asked to evaluate their femininity, sexuality, and physical attractiveness as a means to increase value to their lives. Additionally, this also helps them to be more desirable on the heterosexual market and allows women to use their bodies as leverage and power in the world (Salmenniemi, 2014).

The concept of control is central to this new version of female sexuality. No longer the submissive and passive sexual being, women now actively choose to objectify themselves and to use their sexual power as a tool for success. In this post-feminist perspective, women are encouraged to feel that they have complete control over their bodies; however illusory this feeling is, it offers a new sense of power and confidence. This sense of control not only applies to sexuality, but women are told it will carry over into other aspects of their lives, bringing positive outcomes, happiness, and fulfillment (Carver, 1997). This control seemingly provides women with a new sense of value and power that will lead to the best version of their life.

In this reading, post-feminism helps us to understand Western appearance culture as encouraging a view of the body as project. In post-feminism women are encouraged to evaluate their worth according to their bodies. But unlike past feminist critiques, women should feel both in control of that evaluation as well as their body itself. In this view, physical self-improvement comes to be seen as part of the process of freedom and empowerment. This mindset influences women to see bodies as projects that need constant attention and improvement. The media makes aggressive recommendations related to how a woman should feel about her body and the activities she should participate in, reinforcing a

message that frames these beauty ideals as a matter of health and happiness rather than something that happens by chance. In using specific language, one will come to see that media in magazines like *Health* communicate these beauty ideals as something that each and every person is not only capable of, but something that they owe to themselves, making it a project that is solely about the individual.

Practices of Self-Control

This narrative also fits well with the Western idea of the “American Dream,” which is the idea that, in this country, anything is possible if one works hard enough. Much like the American Dream, failing to succeed in Western appearance culture is viewed as an individual issue. Since individuals in this culture accept their body as their own project they also fully accept responsibility for improvements or failures. As such, individuals are applauded for trying to eat healthily, to eat less, to exercise, and for doing anything they can to lose weight. As with the narrative of the “American Dream,” hard work and motivation are the keys to a success that is open to any individual if they are willing to do what it takes. It is in this perspective that practices of self-evaluation, self-surveillance, and confession all help to reinforce the orientation toward the body as a project to be worked on and to encourage the practice of continual improvement.

Media plays an important role in cultivating practices of self-evaluation, surveillance, and control. In a textual analysis of *Shape* magazine, Duncan (1994) found that there are two main mechanisms that this magazine and other popular fitness magazines use to regulate the relationships women have with their bodies. The first is the “Efficacy Initiative” which calls upon women to make a private commitment or promise to themselves to make the personal choice to change. The second mechanism is “Feeling Good Means Looking Good.” This technique emphasizes the importance of health, but primarily through an emphasis on appearance. This promise of feeling good on the inside gives women a sense of urgency and motivation to look good on the outside. Duncan (1994) discusses these methods as examples of a panoptic gaze.

Using Foucault’s description, Duncan (1994) argues that this structure of looking “encourages the continual surveillance of the self; every wrongdoing is then made visible, allowing the possibility of punishment for each transgression” (p. 50). The panoptic gaze helps us to understand practices of self-monitoring. As we become reflective of our practices of surveying others, we internalize this gaze and begin monitoring our own bodies for any transgressions against the ideals of appearance culture. These mechanisms are so successful because through them we accept them as our own social scrutiny: “The disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Duncan, 1994, p. 50). This way of thinking takes the body and beauty standards that society has set and makes women believe that these standards are their own personal standards. They own these standards just as they own their sexuality leading to the private struggle to meet these standards. The language used in magazines contributes to this self-regulation and reinforces the connections between the body, happiness, and personal motivation (Gill 2010).

These practices of self-surveillance and improvement are reinforced through the media narrative of the confession. Popular culture abounds with success stories of self-improvement; people who were not happy, did something about it, and now have lives better than they could imagine. These stories often include a section where the individual confesses to their past transgressions such as late-night snacking, skipping the gym, or eating fast food. By opening up to the reader and to the world, the individual is opened to judgment and scrutiny. But such judgement is mitigated by the continuation of the story whereby personal responsibility is highlighted. This is the part where the person explains that they have completely changed their life around and that they are now happier than ever. Foucault (1979) explains this confession as an interesting form of power. The practice of confessing grants power to the audience through judgment. Yet it also provides a space for ownership whereby the individual gains a sense of control (Duncan, 1994). Nikolas Rose (1990) states that the confessions

individuals make about their bodies are similar to confessions that are made in Christianity because individuals are “obligated to render [themselves] truthfully into discourse, and a power relation in which the confession was to be made under the authority of another who hears it, evaluates it, judges the soul, and prescribes the form of conduct appropriate” (Rose, 1990, p. 219). This opening of oneself to judgement and evaluation reinforces the idea of surveillance and improvement and helps to define the body as a project in Western appearance culture.

Not only is this confessional perspective highlighted in the media, but it has also moved into everyday experiences. Carey, Donaghue, and Broderick (2011) interviewed teenage girls about their experiences with dieting and their bodies. One key finding was the girls’ participation in fat talk. According to Arroyo and Harwood (2012), fat talk is a constructive process that helps individuals build ideas about their own bodies through conversation about their own and other’s bodies. The girls in Carey, Donaghue, and Broderick’s study explained that fat talk was a way to receive feedback as well as bond with each other by sharing their thoughts and feelings about their bodies. They explained that talking about their bodies in a negative way to each other was done frequently and was welcomed. The interviewees expressed that trying to be skinny was what mattered most. In this, emphasis is placed on progression and effort as much as on success. Confessing one’s appearance sins and promising to do better in the future are important ways that this idea of the body as a project is reinforced.

While the mechanisms of self-improvement provide individuals with a sense of personal control and empowerment, this overlooks the fact that this discourse of reconstruction is really just “new mechanisms to control individual conduct” (Lazzarato 2009, p. 109). In this, Western appearance culture shares something with the capitalist logic of the market. In the market that is appearance culture, members of society make choices that they think are their own, constantly trying to improve themselves on an individual level to acquire value, happiness, and control. Yet this individual

sense of control fails to acknowledge larger social and economic pressures and influence. Beauty ideals are not viewed as outside influences, but as something in the eye of the beholder. The consequence of this individual orientation is that social issues are often ignored and that attention is given to narcissistic tendencies instead of meaningful content (Illouz, 2008). The irony in working tirelessly towards these goals of attractiveness with expectations of happiness, health, and control is that participation reinforces the power and control of Western appearance culture.

Method

To further examine Western appearance culture and the idea of the body as a project, this paper offers a textual analysis of the contemporary magazine *Health*. Though these cultural pressures and ideals can be seen in a variety of media outlets, popular health and fitness magazines are a particularly useful place to see this phenomenon (Botta, 2003). Other research has identified the magazine as a medium that is particularly intense in its reinforcement of cultural appearance standards (Nemeroff, Stein, Diehl, & Smilack, 1994). Popular health and fitness magazines are an exceptionally powerful place to examine and analyze the concepts of western appearance culture because they often include articles that focus on the body and appearance as a predictor to health, happiness, and success in life and treat the body as a project that can be improved upon at all levels.

The popular U.S. magazine *Health* focuses on women’s health with topics related to weight loss, mental health, exercise, and diet. As opposed to fashion and lifestyle magazines, this magazine advertises itself as primarily about physical health rather than overtly about appearance. It also targets an older female audience than many popular fashion magazines, downplaying the focus on overt beauty ideals. For these reasons, this magazine provides a good opportunity to examine the interconnections between the idea of the body as a project and the goal of happiness and life fulfillment that is reinforced in Western appearance culture.

For this analysis, five of the most recent issues of the magazine (June 2017, July/August 2017, September 2017, October 2017, and November 2017) were analyzed. Attention was given to the whole magazine, including a focus on the cover, the table of contents, and specific segments and stories that occurred in each issue. Most articles in the magazine were text heavy, so images were only assessed when they came into play, such as before and after pictures highlighting a body transformation. Advertisements were not included in the sample as the literature on advertisements is broad and not discussed heavily in this paper. The analysis focused on micro-themes that reoccurred throughout the magazines as well as broader categories of articles such as weight loss, body makeovers, and general health.

Analysis and Findings

The analysis showed that the idea of the body as a project was woven into almost every article in *Health* magazine. While the magazine strongly suggested that working out and dieting were top priorities, it also called on women to do things to improve other aspects of their life. These things ranged from choosing the best brands of make-up, always wearing sunscreen, taking steps to prevent aging, and reducing stress. These aspects of life are treated primarily as individual choices, and the magazine encourages readers to identify problems in themselves and to seek to fix these on an individual level. These problems are heavily related to body, health, or appearance, and resolving these problems is viewed as a personal commitment to obtaining happiness and health.

Five main themes help to illustrate these aspects of the magazine. These included: weight loss, body makeover, confessions, age, and general health.

Weight Loss

The majority of articles that were analyzed in the sample mentioned some sort of weight loss strategy, making this theme the most prominent. On all of the covers examined there were short tag lines in big, bold letters that accompanied the featured celebrity

in a bikini or belly shirt. Titles like “LEAN FOR LIFE: Eat more fat, melt ab flab” and “The Food She Gave Up To Look This Amazing” accompany a stunning tanned and toned Eva Longoria on the June 2017 cover. Similar points were also found on the November 2017 cover next to Julianne Hough in a pink belly shirt with glowing skin: “Tiny Foods To Swap To Shed Big Lbs,” and “Burn 500 Extra Calories A Day.” Titles like these on the cover of these magazines set the tone for the content that can be found inside.

Themes of weight loss can be found in many different articles that address a variety of subject material. For example, an article in the July 2017 edition is titled “Beach Body Boot Camp: Wanna get swimsuit ready? All you need are these six simple moves”; another article in the same edition is titled “Your A to Z Summer Shape Up: Fitness moves to feel your best and keep the pounds off all season.” Articles like these suggest that an individual should not be okay with putting their winter body, which was covered by clothes all season, into a summer bikini. Both these articles offer workout routines to help in slimming down for the summer season. Other topics that mention weight loss are dieting articles, such as the September 2017 edition titled “Can TV Make You Slim: Should you snack like Olivia Pope? Lunch like a Kardashian? Find out which moves to steal – and which to skip,” an article that ironically picks apart entertainment television for its portrayals of unhealthy dieting practices. The article describes eating habits seen on popular television shows with an analysis of whether the audience should adopt or resist the dietary habits. What is interesting here is the way this kind of article encourages readers to treat dieting as a constant issue. This is not only something you should think about when grocery shopping, cooking, or eating, but even when you are watching your favorite mindless television program. You should be constantly surveying and evaluating body practices and considering their relationship to your own body project. There was even an article titled “Think Yourself Thin” which explains how to use the science of the brain to control cravings as the “latest weight loss trend” in the June 2017 edition.

The overwhelming amount of weight-loss-related material in this sample of magazines makes it clear that even though this is a magazine avowedly focused on overall health, weight loss takes precedence as the primary health concern. As such, being thin is viewed as being healthy and being overweight is viewed as related to a lack of motivation and control. Through taking steps to become thin, an individual can move toward a project of happiness and fulfillment. *Health* magazine offers a multitude of different ways a person can lose weight, through countless ways to exercise, varying diets, tricks to increase willpower, weight loss surgery, and even brain science. It leaves individuals with absolutely no excuse as to why they could not make an effort to lose weight and improve personally, and reinforces the view that this should be a woman's primary concern when thinking about her "health."

In this appearance culture, weight loss has become something that seen as a challenging project that can and should be an open conversation. Magazines like *Health* suggest that it should be talked about with friends, as a way to bond. It should be seen as motivational entertainment. Appearance culture makes sure that weight loss is not seen as something that should be dreaded but rather as a liberating and empowering journey with a destination that will bring happiness, health, and the best version of one's life.

Beyond overall weight loss, *Health* also encourages a form of self-scrutiny and evaluation that contributes to body objectification. As noted above, objectification can include approaching the body as distinct parts when surveying the self for imperfections. Many articles in the sample were found to do exactly this, focusing on one part of the body and giving the readers ways to fix that specific part of the body. In fact, a common article structure was to provide readers with a celebrity and showcase an ideal part of their body like the legs, the arms, or the abs. This would be followed with a description from their fitness trainer explaining the workout that achieved this perfect body part. In the September 2017 edition, an article titled "Steal Selena's Leg Sculpting Secret" explains how 25-year-old Selena Gomez keeps

her legs toned. In the article is a quote from her personal trainer explaining the exercises she does, suggesting that if the reader wants the same results they should do these exercises four to six times a week. By having a picture of the singer showing off her amazing toned legs, the article gives readers an exact standard to hold themselves to and helps them imagine her legs on their body. More importantly, this form of objectification is not simply a passive, voyeuristic representation, but an active objectification that occurs with the full consent of both the woman represented and the female audience. This discourse suggests that individuals should not only scrutinize their overall appearance but also pay attention to specific parts of the body in order to dissect smaller, extremely specific flaws like armpit fat, stretch marks, cellulite, canckles, or a double chin. Readers may choose to do this using one or many of the diet and exercise suggestions the magazine makes in order to achieve the specific looks that are being presented in articles such as these. *Health* magazine not only offers descriptions of the parts of the body that should be scrutinized, but solutions for these problems, dieting being the number one suggestion.

Body Makeovers & Confessions

As mentioned previously, body makeovers have become a common narrative in our culture. Body makeovers have been historically represented when a female who is overweight, depressed, and doesn't know how to dress makes a change in her life, transforming into a completely different person. These types of stories work the same way for many individuals; it is satisfying to see someone take control of her life and make a serious change for the better.

Articles in *Health* magazine feature many of these body makeover stories showing us before and after pictures of women who were overweight and "not feeling like themselves" or "uncomfortable in their own skin." An illuminating example can be found in an article titled "From Obese to Iron Man" in June 2017. In this piece a woman explains to the reader how her life needed fixing, confessing that after she had kids, she started to

eat more fast food, and the numbers on the scale started to climb: “I was 235 pounds, depressed, and low on energy. I realized that if I didn’t change I would continue to feel miserable for years to come” (Kunes, p. 51). She completes the story explaining how she decided to sign up for a half marathon and how she struggled to run even half way down her street at first but moving her body felt “invigorating.” After continuing to run every day and making low-calorie dietary choices the pounds started “dropping fast.” Today she has completed seven Ironman competitions and says when she thinks about the days where she could hardly make it down her street she feels “humbled, empowered and, most important, unstoppable” (Kunes, p. 51). Along with the article is an unflattering “before picture” of the woman with measurements of her weight, dress size, and total pounds lost next to the photo. It is small in comparison to the large professional photo of the woman running down a path in a sports bra and matching athletic leggings while smiling.

This story provides a clear example of how the body is presented as a project in this literature. There is a clear understanding that her movement from “miserable” to “unstoppable” is one bound up with a change in her physical appearance. As with the discussion of confessions, the story provides the audience the power of judgment and allows them to relate to her. Her journey toward a happier and healthier life motivates women to believe that they can and should do the same so they can also feel this empowered. More importantly, this is a story of individual success and it fails to address other social, cultural, or economic issues. Besides the struggle of motivation and willpower, the reader hears nothing about the struggles of motherhood, constraints of time and money, or even body changes that come with pregnancy. Instead, this article, and many others, focuses only on things that women seemingly have control over, rather than actual barriers that would affect one’s success in any transformation or body makeover.

Confessions are often mentioned in body transformation

stories similar to the article above, but the magazine offers many other ways for the audience to read about confessions and also gives them a chance to make confessions to themselves about their own habits and bodies. For example, in the September 2017 issue there is a quiz the reader can take to help them find out “what prompts you to pig out.” After choosing from a number of multiple choice questions about the circumstances under which one eats along with the frequency and the kind of food, the reader is then prompted to add up their score to find out what makes them “pig out.” The options were “snacking out of habit,” “meals aren’t cutting it,” “emotional snacker,” and “because the snacks are there” (p. 65). Taking this quiz calls for someone to not only be self-aware in their eating habits but also willing to admit to their wrong doings. Identifying possibly unhealthy habits also calls the reader to then do something with the information they now know. The reader is now conscious of this flaw in their eating habits and must take responsibility for this on an individual level, further monitoring their eating.

Another article from the September 2017 issue describes the story of a woman who transformed her body using social media. She confesses that she was always the “fat funny friend” whose “weight matched her personality” (Levi, p. 66). When she went to college she gained the “freshman 15” on top of her other weight because of the unlimited access to unhealthy food in the dining halls, which is something people who went to college can relate to. She explains how she started going to the gym every morning and immediately lost 20 pounds, but it wasn’t until she used social media to study and learn about bodybuilding through following fitness accounts that she lost the remainder of her weight. This article not only included confessions such as “being the fat funny friend” or “gaining the freshman 15” that readers can relate to but it also provided a way for readers to learn about how to become skinny and fit through social media. Implied here is not only a set of recommendations for how the reader can make over their physical appearance, but a set of tools for how to better use social media in the benefit of one’s body project.

Even featured celebrities make confessions to the readers in certain articles. Stars like Julianne Hough, Gabrielle Union, and Eva Longoria admit that at times it is hard to find time to work out, keep up with their diet, or make time to take care of themselves. They confess to having guilty pleasures like eating pancakes or sleeping in. They confess to sometimes getting overwhelmed and not liking the way they look, but they always admit that taking care of oneself is not only worth it, but essential, and it always pays off in the end. Articles that include confessions such as these play a prominent role in *Health* because they allow readers to identify their flaws by relating to the women in these articles and then identifying what needs to be done to combat these issues personally.

Age and General Health

Age was a key theme throughout these magazines and helps to represent the extent to which the body as project interjects into far reaches of the self. Whenever a woman in an article was mentioned, her age was also provided. On the cover of the September 2017 edition is the title “Gabrielle Union at Age 44!” right next to Gabrielle’s head. The words “Age-Proof Your Body With 3 Simple Strength Moves!” can be found on the cover in June 2017. In the article titled “Looking Good is Feeling Good,” the 63-year-old model, Christine Brinkley, explains why she is “not done saying yes to bikinis” and how she keeps her body looking good and feeling good by eating a mostly vegan diet, wearing sun screen, and exercising (p. 19). Her age is the reason she is in the magazine and the fact that she is 63 and looks the way she does is why she is being celebrated in the article. Age is often talked about in appearance culture as something that individuals have control over and something that can be prevented. The problematic transition from youth to middle-age to old age is something that is heavily focused on. In our appearance culture aging is something that is akin to disease or almost unnatural. Popular media often represents senior citizens as sexless, disabled, sick, unattractive, and delusional (Luther, Lepre, & Clark 2012). These representations contribute to the fear and dread that comes with growing older. Appearance

culture combats this by making individuals, especially women, feel that they are in control of their aging process. These magazines offer the insight of women who are aging gracefully, or seemingly not at all, to readers so that they might feel that they too can take preventative measures. The articles in this magazine approach age in the same way that they approach weight loss. They offer suggestions to combat and control the process with a promise of physical and mental well-being in the end.

This emphasis on anti-aging pervades other areas of health news in the magazine as well. In an article “15 Things You Need to Know About Sun Protection” from the June 2017 edition, dermatologist Robert Anolik MD is quoted stating: “when people come in for Botox, lasers, and fillers I tell them 90% of what we are aiming to treat – the wrinkles, brown spots, blood vessels, large pores – it’s strictly due to sun exposure” (Edgar, p. 26). This article highlights the way in which health concerns that might arise from sun exposure are primarily related to physical manifestations of age. Moreover, the use of sunblock is addressed less to circumvent health concerns such as cancer and instead treated as a way to help prevent and solve the aging problem.

Age is not something that can be controlled. However, the theme of aging, like many other themes mentioned in these magazines, is viewed as something that individual women can control and something they should evaluate in their own life and seek to address in their body project.

Health related articles that were separate from weight loss were also looked at in the sample. Interestingly, these articles were usually part of a section in the magazines titled “Live Healthy.” This is a bit ironic as the entire magazine is supposed to be focused on “Health.” Relegating actual health topics to this one section of the magazine helps to reinforce the idea that weight loss and appearance are the primary means through which the magazine addresses health issues. The topics in this section range from sun protection to mental health (“Be More Zen,” September 2017), stress reduction, and finding happiness. A smaller part of the “Live

Healthy” section is titled “Our Doc Will See You Now,” a section that asks readers to write in with questions for Heath’s medical editor, Roshini Rajapaksa, MD. While a number of these questions were related to women’s health specifically, many also were focused on weight and appearance. For example, one reader’s question was titled, “There is a random dark hair that grows on my chin. What the heck?” (Rajapaksa, p. 65). Also included here were questions pertaining to cellulite or other non-threatening appearance “problems.”

While age and general health are not issues that seem necessarily related to appearance culture, in this analysis we can recognize that these issues are also bound up with the idea of the body as a project and intertwined with concepts of appearance as an integral part of this project.

Discussion

The type of articles that can be found in *Health* magazine reveal a few very important things about the way Western appearance culture works and the effects it has on society. One thing that became obvious in this research was the emphasis on self-motivation and hard work as the tools to not only improve bodies but also lives, mentality, diets, and even age. Everything and anything can be improved. The articles in these magazines encourage women to do things like meditate once a day, stretch every morning, exercise to “age-proof” one’s body, use certain creams, take certain supplements, cook like this, eat these foods, avoid these foods, and to wear sunblock, just to name a few. These practices promise results like looking younger, losing weight, having more energy, feeling less stressed, and being happy. The overarching message is that you are in control of these aspects of your life; therefore, you are in control of your own happiness. This message encourages women to view their body as a project that can be molded, shaped, and, ultimately, transformed. Talking about the human body in this way ensures constant attention and self-surveillance. It marks attention to beauty ideals and our quest to meet those as personal choice and freedom and limits challenges

to the use of time, effort, money, and resources that feed such projects.

Conclusion

This analysis helped to show the ways in which *Health* magazine is complicit in Western appearance culture’s view of the body as a project that needs to be worked on and constantly improved. Whether it was through discussions of weight loss, age prevention, or general health, appearance culture was at work throughout the pages in every edition of the magazine, constantly calling on the readers to actively fix something about themselves. Analyzing these articles through a post-feminist lens, it is evident that health and fitness magazines are an extremely effective place to study the power of Western appearance culture. Even in a magazine that is titled “Health,” there is an overwhelming amount of content that calls women to work on improving their bodies and their appearance while sharing promising testimonials of women who have turned their lives around and are feeling happier, healthier, and more empowered than ever because they chose to put themselves first and make a change. It can be argued that the panoptic gaze is also at work throughout the content in these magazines. This mentality takes the body and beauty standards that society has set and makes women believe that these standards are their own, leading to a private struggle to meet these standards. Confessions were found in every edition, ranging from the confessions of celebrities to confessions of everyday women, asking the reader to relate to the struggles of these women. Lastly, this analysis also helps to show how members of appearance culture take on these issues as their own, treating this orientation toward constant improvement as an individual choice and under individual control. However, this distracts for larger political, social, or economic issues that might be important to projects of transformation and larger issues of happiness. Ultimately this analysis helps to illuminate the ways that popular health and fitness magazines use mechanisms and language to motivate women to see their body as a project that needs constant attention and upkeep in order to assign value to

their lives and make improvements on themselves.

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